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The Passing of a Teamster Rebel: Remembering Bennie Jackson

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Bennie Jackson on the right confronting one of the old guard dinosaurs. Photographer unknown.

Recently, I learned that my old union representative Bennie Jackson passed away seven months ago. He was a lifelong union militant at United Parcel Service (UPS) in Chicago and was elected Recording-Secretary of the Teamsters Local 705, along with [Jerry Zero](#) and [John McCormick](#) on a reform slate in the mid-1990s. He was reelected in 1997 following the Great UPS Strike. It is surprising to me that Bennie's passing was not widely known or reported, given how important he was to the fightback at UPS and the Teamster reform movement from a very young age.

I first met Bennie in the months leading up to the [1997 UPS strike](#). The Teamsters had launched a [contract campaign](#) against UPS at their 1996 convention. I was a member of the International Socialist Organization (ISO) in Chicago. We were mirroring the much larger Teamsters' campaign with our own, attempting to build upon the labor work during the Decatur, Illinois "[War Zone](#)" battles. We were a small group trying to feel our way through a small resurgence of trade

union resistance in the mid-1990s. UPS was potentially a larger field to politically intervene in, which was something few of us had any experience with.

One day while a handful of us were selling our newspaper, *Socialist Worker*, to workers at the end of day shift at UPS's Jefferson Street hub in Chicago's South Loop, Bennie came out to see what was going on. Apparently, the security guards had grown nervous and made a call to Earl Cox, the crotchety labor manager on the third floor, whom Bennie was meeting with. Bennie later told me that he was meeting with Earl and the security guards said something like, "Your people are causing problems at the gate."

Confused, Bennie came down to find out what was going on. He came out of the gate and I recognized him immediately. I knew Bennie by reputation from the handful of veterans from Upsurge, the radical rank and file group of UPS Teamsters that blossomed in the mid-to late 1970s, that were members or friends of the ISO, such as Wayne Heimbach and Anne Mackie. Bennie was friendly and slightly amused. He bought a copy of *Socialist Worker*. I asked him if we could talk later about the contract campaign and the likelihood of a national strike. He said sure.

Right away, I could tell Bennie was different from most Teamster officers in Chicago. The bulk of them were pretty hostile, cool, or perplexed by socialists showing up at union meetings or UPS hubs across the country. One of the few exceptions was Jerry Zero, the Secretary-Treasurer of Teamsters 705, who considered himself on the Left, a rarity in the union, while the local's president John McCormick was extremely conservative and anti-Communist, which was much more the type of official you'd meet from the Teamsters.

As I was to learn over time, Bennie took those of us on the left seriously, if we took fighting UPS seriously, this also included fighting the racism that Black workers faced on the job and in the Teamsters union. Bennie's roots as a union militant stretched back to the late 1960s, when the radical student movement and the rank and file rebellion of UPS workers came together. Despite the many up and downs that radicals and reformers struggled with during the decades that followed, that spirit of rank and file activism stayed with Bennie.

Wildcat at Jeff Street

Bennie's family was originally from Mississippi, like many African-American families in Chicago, and grew up on the Southside. In the 1960s, Bennie came of age when a new generation of Black youth were embracing militant activism and radical politics. Soon after graduating from Wendell Phillips High School in 1968, Bennie started working at the UPS hub at Jefferson Street in Chicago's South Loop. UPS was a rapidly expanding company and was a major draw for Black men, and during the 1970s increasingly for women and Vietnam veterans.

The Metro Chicago UPS hub, known as "Jeff Street," were members of Teamsters Local 705, the notoriously mobbed-up local led by Louie Peick. By all accounts, Peick was a monster who regularly deployed gangsters, thugs, and off-duty cops to crush any dissent in his fiefdom. He did the dirty

work for UPS and the other big freight companies represented by his local. UPS was known as, and still is a brutal employer with horrid working conditions.

Faced with a brutal employer and an indifferent to hostile union leadership, rank and file workers at Jeff Street took matters into their own hands on April 1, 1969 and launched a wildcat strike in response to four workers being fired and excessive overtime. Bennie and his friend Freeman Wilson, along with a handful of other workers were the leaders of the strike, though they were not directly mentioned in press accounts. Both the company and the union were caught off-guard.

The *Chicago Daily Defender*, the city's historic campaigning newspaper with a national following and reputation, reported that, "About 70 percent of the dissent workers are black."

The *Defender* reporter extensively quoted an unnamed spokesperson, who declared the men are not going to "buy Pike's [sic] promises that all will be worked out when you return to work." The anonymous spokesperson continued:

"We listened to that same talk when we walked out in 1967. We don't want to arbitrate, we want the union to make the company abide by the contract, that's all. The reason Pike [sic] wants us on the job is so that he won't lose all the money while we stay out. We want the overtime lifted and we want the four men reinstated before we go back, if we do."

The *Defender* further reported that the strikers walked off their jobs on April 1 after working a regular 8-hour day. "We just punched our time cards and walked out in protest against the overtime being jammed down our throats," the spokesperson said. UPS struck back and locked the gates, barring the strikers from returning despite a court injunction ordering them to. Initially three hundred workers took part in the wildcat. The support for the wildcat was led and supported primarily by dock workers. Wayne Heimbach, one of two regional organizers working out of the Student for a Democratic Society's (SDS) national office in Chicago, witnessed the strike:

Feeder drivers (UPS lingo for semi-truck drivers), as far as I remember, always crossed the line when in their trucks with only a couple of them that I saw give a sign of support to the strike. There was also a clear division between the 705 and the 710/other road drivers on how they saw the strike. I didn't have a clue then on the difference then, but the people from the docks obviously knew. Once there was also a group of 705 feeder drivers meeting together across the street from the terminal trying to figure out if they would cross the line. They were really nervous and eventually went in but none of the strikers were hostile or anything. It was quite an experience.

Wayne also remembered:

705 reps were there ushering the feeders through the gates but couldn't do much else. The strength came from the strikers and also from supporters. It was a real show. Besides the patrol cops there was also a good number of red squad detectives driving around – I immediately recognized the type from SDS stuff I had seen the year before [1968].

The strike lasted thirteen days, a very long time for an unofficial or wildcat strike. Around 1,800 worked at Jeff Street. Larry Lewis, one of the fired “ringleaders” of wildcat named in the press, told the *Defender*, “Company officials intimidated the men by sending telegrams, making phone calls to their homes and urging their wives to persuade the men to return to work.” While Louie Peick told the press that he would demand that the four wildcat leaders be rehired and given back pay to those who honored the picket line, Lewis was skeptical and doubted that he would be rehired by UPS. “They’ve been trying to get me out long before this,” Lewis told the *Defender*, “so now they’ll have a good chance to do it.”

The 1969 wildcat turned Bennie into a lifelong Teamster militant. The wildcat at Jeff Street was one spark of an insurgency sweeping through the industrial workplaces in the United States, that in many cases were led by radical Black workers. It also began a lifelong relationship with the radical left in Chicago. Bennie told me during our many discussions during the years I worked at Jeff Street, that during the wildcat he and a few other strikers went up to the campus of University of Illinois Chicago (UIC) looking for support from the burgeoning radical student movement.

The *Defender* reported, “Pickets had been set up at the company daily and were joined by students from the Circle Campus of the University of Illinois.”

Shop Floor battles

From the 1970s onward, Jeff Street was rocked by further wildcat strikes, confrontations with management, especially the racist treatment of Black drivers and inside hub workers, who did the dirty and dangerous jobs of loading, unloading, and sorting of packages. Bennie proudly worked on the “docks” as he called them, and saw himself as an advocate for the increasing part-time and overwhelmingly Black workforce that UPS saw as disposable.

He fiercely fought both the company and the union. According to veteran labor reporter David Moberg, in a 1999 profile of Local 705, “Bennie Jackson lost his job seven times; he kept winning it back by hiring outside attorneys who defended him against both management and the union, but he spent many months out of work.” Bennie told Moberg:

Business agents used to tell part-timers at UPS, “If you get UPS angry, there’s nothing we can do.” When full-time workers complained about company practices they were told, “You’re lucky you’ve got a job.”

It was a hardcore of Black workers at Jeff Street that was one of the major bases for the reform movement that came to power in 1995. It was an uneasy coalition of reformers made up of people from very different political histories and personalities, but it came together under the tutelage and pressure of Ron Carey, the first and only rank and file reform leader elected General President of the Teamsters in 1991. For those of us who worked at Jeff Street, the union culture was starkly different from the other UPS hubs in the Chicago area, largely because of Bennie.

Kieran Knudson, who worked at Jeff Street as a sorter and Air Driver from 1998-2003 after having previously worked in UPS hubs in Minneapolis and Detroit, told me his lasting impression of working there:

Black workers put a certain stamp on the place. For instance, in Minneapolis the Sup's would bully and harass employees to work harder by calling us sissies, pussies, or f*****s. That could never happen at Jeff St because the Black workers would just not tolerate it. If anyone epitomized the legacy and power of Black labor at Jeff St it was Bennie Jackson, the imposing Recording Secretary at the reform-led Teamsters 705, with a deep history at Jeff St.

For Kieran, Bennie made this possible.

The Sup's and upper management were scared of him and he had the loyalty of the workforce, especially the long-term Black workers there. I can remember a time where 705 had decided to enforce work-to-rule at Jeff St during a contract campaign. I remember Bennie showing up one work night and briefly and quietly visiting every belt and work area in the hub and with many fewer words than I was using, getting full clarity on and adherence to work-to-rule across the center.

But, Kieran thought Bennie's militancy had limits. "In my view Bennie didn't use this power enough and didn't develop the militants and organization on the shop floor enough to carry out the struggle between his visits."

Another old friend, who worked at Jeff Street, gave me another example of Bennie scarring the shit of management:

In the summer of 1998 when I was unloading trailers at the Jefferson Street hub and the stewards and other workers told us Bennie to go outside the fence on our 15 minute break. The whole primary walked out and Bennie gathered us together. Bennie told us that since the company refused to honor the contract we should work as we felt they treated us.

He asked this question "Are we satisfied or dissatisfied workers?" During this impromptu meeting management called the Chicago cops to intimidate us. When our break was over we knew what to do. We unloaded boxes as we felt we were treated. The boxes trickled slowly out of the trailers and management was angry and no doubt scared of what we were doing. This was the real power of the union and workers' militancy. This was real rank and file power.

He remembers how shocked he was at the difference between working at Jeff Street and at UPS's mammoth Chicago Area Consolidated Hub (called the "CACH") located in Chicago's southwest suburbs:

A few years later UPS management moved more and more of the volume from Jefferson Street to the gigantic CACH facility outside of Chicago. Many of us were forced to travel long distances to get to this building that has over 1000 trailer bays. My first day there a Teamster business agent

gathered us former Jeff Street workers together and told us that “you won’t be doing any of that Jeff Street shit here.” I’ll never forget those two exactly opposite moments.

Things fall apart

It was a long road from the 1969 wildcat to the 1997 national strike against UPS, but Bennie was there every step of the way, despite the threat of violence and potentially getting killed. Jeff Street received a disproportionate share of the media coverage during the 1997 strike because of its proximity to the major media outlets in the Loop. Its picket line was well manned, boisterous, highly political, and at times hard to manage. Bennie had his hands full. Teamster General President Ron Carey and AFL-CIO President John Sweeney chose Jeff Street for a mammoth rally covered by the international media to demonstrate labor and public support for the UPS strikers.

In the final week of the strike, the ISO initiated a solidarity rally at the old UE Hall on Ashland Ave. The “Support UPS Workers Solidarity Rally,” included Bennie Jackson, veteran Chicago trade union leader Jack Spiegel, Jodi Budenears, a striking UPS pilot, Dan Lane, the famous Staley Road Warrior, and myself. Bennie took the meeting seriously and brought several of his union stewards and active members from Jeff Street to rally. He took us seriously. Bennie’s voice was hoarse from the strike but he spoke with great authenticity:

I understand the plight of the part-timers. I know what it is like to be in a truck when its ninety degrees to one hundred and twenty degrees ... We have a lot of members who were former welfare mothers and UPS isn’t offering them any medical benefits. Their children aren’t being offered any medicine.

Bennie told the audience of reading a letter to a group of part timers from Christine Owens, a UPS district manager in Chicago, claiming that the Teamsters only had \$20 million in strike funds and that when it ran out, they’d be crossing the line. He asked the part timers if Owens was right. “What is your response to Christine?” Jackson yelled. “Hell, no! Hell, no!” the crowd responded.

The Teamsters victory over UPS in 1997 was a real one, but many strikers and Bennie felt frustrated by the final settlement. I know he was angry at being excluded from the final negotiation session for Teamsters’ 705’s local UPS contract. I remember him telling me that he didn’t understand why we had to wait a year to create new full time jobs. He had after all watched untold numbers of full time jobs disappear at Jeff Street over the decades. I also know he was increasingly angry and frustrated at the treatment of young Black men and women before the joint Teamsters/UPS grievance panel.

I witnessed firsthand Bennie getting into a shouting match with the union chair of the grievance panel, and then he dramatically got up, opened the door and showed the room a corridor of young Black men awaiting their fate. He shouted, “You want to know who gets fired from this company?” I could also tell he was overwhelmed by the job of being a union representative at a company in a relentless battle against its own workers. He was frustrated with many of his stewards and at the

ability of the company to hire some into management positions. It was and is an endless class war at UPS.

After Ron Carey was removed from the leadership of the Teamsters in a federal government sponsored witch hunt, there was very little pressure to keep the reform leadership together, and it imploded into a vicious factional struggle. I didn't agree with many of the political choices that Bennie made, but they didn't come out of nowhere. I feared that he had tarnished his legacy.

Teamsters 705 was touted as the "model of reform" by many people, yet the quick collapse of the leadership demonstrated how shallow the reform movement was and how deeply entrenched the problems and divisions among the membership of the union were. Looking back now nearly twenty years from when I worked there, I realize what a unique place Jeff Street was. We need more young Bennie Jacksons. Rest in power!

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